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**History painting and patriotism: James Barry and Jacques Louis David**  
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In his book, *A Letter to the Dilettanti Society* (1798), James Barry (1741-1806), an Irish-born painter living in London, claimed that the creation of an academy of arts would definitely improve British society, especially on a moral level. He thought that the situation was much better in France thanks to the talent of artists such as Jacques Louis David (1748-1825). Barry hailed David's reforming efforts which enabled the French to gather around a new patriotic feeling. He hoped that the French example would be followed in the British Isles so as to foster civility and virtue (Barry 1798, 26-7).

David is considered as the main European painter between the years 1785-1815. His career covers a very troubled period including the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the fall of the monarchy and the Empire. As a liberal, David welcomed the promises of social change fostered by the Revolution. He was even elected deputy to the National Convention in 1792. He painted propagandist works celebrating the republican martyrs. He later became Napoleon's official portraitist and represented him as a national hero. As regards Barry, his career reflects the complexity of the Irish situation and illustrates the hopes and disappointments of a section of the Irish population *vis-à-vis* the Union of 1801. Exiled in London to earn his living, Barry integrated an Irish subtext into some of his compositions and criticised the British policy concerning the Irish question. - he criticised British policy in Ireland in his book, *A Letter to the Dilettanti Society*.

These critiques are obviously not voiced explicitly because of Barry's situation position in London. Barry wished to live from patronage and could not, therefore, be too disrespectful. Furthermore, he believed in a possible reconciliation between Ireland and England within a new United Kingdom that would be more tolerant on a religious level. His disappointment was all the greater when he understood that the Union would not meet his expectations, especially as regards Catholic emancipation. Certain drawings like *Passive Obedience* (1802-1805) attest this change of mindset. Both painters were trained in Rome under the guidance of Joseph-Marie Vien. They later chose to concentrate on history painting, the noblest genre, superior to all others morally and intellectually. They first took their inspiration from ancient subjects before dealing more directly with the history of their homeland. According to them, history should allow the artist to show his fellow-citizens the way to social improvement. Both Barry and David claimed visual arts had moral power enabling artists to act for the public good. This moral regeneration should take into account historic and heroic models, whether ancient or not. Painting is not only a matter of aesthetics but it is also an intellectual undertaking.

In this chapter, I intend to show the importance of history painting in the Enlightenment era and its particular codes. More specifically, I will focus on the way Barry and David used these codes and modified them to accommodate local history and universal moral concerns. I will also highlight their conception of the artist's role within society and the close links between painting, history and patriotism.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the taste for *rococo* art was gradually replaced by a more moralising style. As sensual and decorative as the *rococo* might have been, its aim was not to educate the mind of the public. The philosophy of the

Enlightenment prompted artists to produce a more profound and rich art which would touch the viewers while educating them by giving them models of conduct. Or, as Diderot put it: *‘Bouleversez-moi, réduisez-moi en pièces, faites-moi frissonner, pleurer, trembler, mettez-moi en colère; puis apaisez mes yeux, si vous le pouvez’* (Lee 2002, 15).

Anecdotes from the Greek and Roman mythologies were thus to be replaced by antique or biblical heroic scenes. The subject of these scenes was taken from literary sources such as the Bible, ancient history and epic poetry. The aim was to educate by showing man performing heroic deeds or in situations proving his heroism and his greatness. History painting was considered as intellectually superior to other genres such as landscape or portrait painting which were only designed to please the eye but not enlighten the mind. The public taste did not follow immediately the advice of the intellectuals and the rococo kept selling well. In France, King Louis XVI was the first monarch to encourage history painting because he thought that such painting would legitimise and consolidate national identity. From 1775 onwards, he started granting more funding to commissions of patriotic and didactic works, enabling history painting to blossom even in the public taste.

According to Sir Joshua Reynolds, painter and member of the Royal Academy, art should only be devoted to representing the ideal, and leave aside the local and day-to-day activities. The neoclassical movement was based on the choice of universal themes which allowed artists to cross cultural and national borders. In his book *Discourses on Art* (1769-1790), a collection of his lectures at the Royal Academy, Reynolds encouraged painters to rise above the local dimension so as to approach universal themes and aim at representing forms that would be universally recognised.

Many even thought that painting was writing for the illiterate and that it was more easily understandable than words. James Barry compared painting and poetry, saying that their methods and aims were similar. Both arts sought to create a certain image in the reader's or viewer's mind, an image that should inspire as well as instruct:

All writers of character, who have employed their thoughts upon the productions of genius, are universally agreed, that the essence and groundwork of poetry and painting is in every respect the same; and Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Epistle to the Pisos*, will be found just as essentially applicable to painting as to poetry. There is necessarily in both, the same glowing enthusiastic fancy to go in search of materials, and the same cool judgment is necessary in combining them. They collect from the same objects, and the same result or abstract picture must be formed in the mind of each, as they are equally to be addressed to the same passions in the hearer or spectator. The scope and design of both is to raise ideas in the mind, of such great virtues and great actions as are best calculated to move, to delight, and to instruct. In short, according to Simonides's excellent proverb 'painting is silent poetry, and poetry is a speaking picture' (Barry 1775, 107-8).

But Barry thought that visual art was superior to poetry thanks to its evocative power. 'It is a mode of communication as much superior to language, as the image of anything in a looking-glass is more satisfactory and superior to any mere account of the same thing in words' (Barry 1798, 63). For Barry, painting was the noblest of all arts because of its capacity to call up associations of ideas more quickly than any other art. Reynolds even compared the aim of art to that of civic humanism. He claimed that both shared the same concern for the public good. Art thus had noble aims and the artist should not create art for art but for higher purposes:

We pursue the same method in our search after the idea of beauty and perfection in each; of virtue, by looking forward beyond ourselves to society, and to the whole; of arts, by extending our view in the same manner to all ages and all times (Reynolds 1797, 134). The quest for the public good should prevail over that of personal and domestic well-being. History painting should also avoid focusing on local forms or subjects, and aim for an ideal and general model. These perfect situations were often taken from classical antiquity because enlightened philosophers claimed that history should not have a value in itself. The artist was expected to struggle to overcome his or her desire to create art in order to succeed in educating the viewer. The artist's duty was more moral than historical. That is why the subjects of history painting had to be of classical origin according to Reynolds, as they were supposed to inspire morals and virtue better than local history. Reynolds even denies the interest of national history because he finds it too local and too trivial. Here is his criticism of Dutch art:

The painters of the Dutch school have still more locality. With them, a history-piece is properly a portrait of themselves; whether they describe the inside or outside of their houses, we have their own people engaged in their own peculiar occupations; working, or drinking, playing or fighting. The circumstances that enter into a picture of this kind, are so far from giving a general view of human life, that they exhibit all the minute particularities of a nation differing in several respects from the rest of mankind (Reynolds 1797, 69).

Dutch painters were too circumstantial. They did not look beyond themselves to society or aim at universal principles and forms. They rather emphasized their differences and originality. Reynolds considered cultural and national specificities as trivial as day-to-day activities. These were not worthy subjects. Reynolds, however, did

not live up to his idealism and spent most of his time painting portraits. Still, there was no higher vocation than history painting. Barry and David both subscribed to the humanist ideas of the Enlightenment and to the taste for history painting because it emphasized the role of the artist who could not be considered as a mere craftsman. According to Barry, the art of painting was devoted to the improvement of society and the artist had a very important role to play in this process: 'Our art has the glory of being a moral art, with extensive means, peculiarly universal, and applicable to all ages and nations, to the improvement and deepest interests of society' (Barry 1798, 14). Painting was the most universal form of language and could thus be understood by anybody. It should then be used for noble purposes to improve society.

Luke Gibbons considers *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784-5) as the ideal formulation of patriotic virtue (Gibbons 1991, 103-4). This work is often said to be the clearest statement of neoclassical painting because of its stiffness and concern for patriotic duty. David took inspiration from the play *Horace* by the French playwright Pierre Corneille. It is widely celebrated for its enhancing of male virtues and civility. But the episode of the oath did not exist in the play. David's work conveys a sort of tension which makes it highly powerful. The setting looks like a theatre stage. Horace's three sons are pledging their allegiance to Rome even if this leads them to fight the Curatii, hero of the city of Albano and their own brothers-in-law. The nation is more important than their own family. The painting is divided in two parts. On the left we can see the men and their patriotic ardour and on the other, the women seem to be resigned to their fates. This conflicts with the rules of unity. Moreover, the composition is not centred. David takes liberties with the traditional rules of the grand style. This painting enabled him to be considered as the leader of a new school of painting in France. If the

work echoes the aforementioned concerns for virtue and civility, it is considered mainly as a fresh and striking image by the public (Lee 2002, 93-5).

This work perfectly illustrates the rules of history painting, although the end of the Horatii's story is much more tragic than it seems when you look at the painting. All the Curatii are killed, the only Horace left ends up killing his sister because she mourned her fiancé. The full story shows a form of patriotism where violence and death are the only possible ends, the price to pay for personal commitment. If Barry painted antique works, he also started linking history painting and national identity very early in his life. He thus contravened the rules of the genre, as he upheld that:

History painting and sculpture should be the main views of every people desirous of gaining honours by the arts. These are tests by which the national character will be tried after ages, and by which it has been, and is now, tried by the natives of other countries (Walker 1790, 22-3).

Barry thought that works of art not only proved the value of the nation but also emphasized its character and its originality. In his book *Inquiry into the Real and the Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisitions of the Arts in England*, (1775) he claims that art can show the public what it should or should not do by offering them images of beauty and deformity. These representations had to be adapted to each culture, as art could be moral, sublime and civil only if it showed perfections that befitted the national character of each country. Barry shared Reynolds' ideals about the universality of art but, unlike him, placed it at the core of national construction. Reynolds' ideal did not survive the American and the French revolutions which brought to the fore the prominent importance of history as a living force. The use of the past by the various republican or reforming movements in France and in Ireland pushed history to the



forefront. When one looks at works by Barry and David, the coexistence of classical antiquity and contemporary events is striking.

From the 1750s, a new interest in national and local history emerged at the instigation of German historians such as Herder.<sup>1</sup> Herder claimed that each culture was unique and original and depended primarily on the characteristics peculiar to each people. He also believed that historians needed to move away from the study of classical antiquity so as to avoid neglecting their own nations' past. Each nation of Europe should be studied for itself and not compared to any other. Herder criticized all universal values because he held them to neglect the original spirit of each people. Irish historians retained from Herder the fact that each people has its own original history that should be studied from within according to its own time and place. They therefore tried to move local and national history back into the spotlight. But according to the advocates of classical antiquity, national tradition was closer to superstition and fable than to history; it was not appropriate for the creation of an art with moral duties. Thomas Campbell claimed that the history of Ireland lacked coherence and heroic or exemplary events. Irish history was too topsy-turvy for him; trivial events, he believed, were the only motives for war and not, as it should have been, moral action or motive: There is no variety of events, no consecutive series of action, no motives to war, or inducements to peace, but the adultery of some queen, the rape of some virgin, or the murder of some chief. In fine, there is no exemplary morality, no colour of just history (Campbell 1777, 239).

Irish history does not seem worth representing on canvas when you read such a passage. More generally, local history could not be taken as a subject for history painting because it did not show heroic examples that could inspire moral deeds. In the

British Isles, Edmund Burke had a crucial influence thanks to his theory on tradition. He claimed that tradition was based on the customs and wisdom inherited from the ancestors (Dunne 1988, 72). Burke's writings were considerably influential in the artistic field. He was Reynolds' friend and Barry's patron. He was so close to Reynolds that, at the time, certain commentators said that Burke had actually written the *Discourses on Art*. What is clear though is that from 1776, Reynolds gradually broke away from radical humanism to assert instead that the general or universal that we perceive is the remnant of traditions and customs (Reynolds 1797, 282). According to John Barrell, the American and French revolutions forced art theorists to reconsider the interest of local and national history. Reynolds looked at the French Revolution with fear and he certainly did not want his theory to justify such an event. Indeed, what suits the French does not necessarily suit the British. The British national interest is not the same as that of the French (Barrell 1986, 151).

In addition, some nationalist movements used the past to legitimize their action by asserting their continuity with the heritage left by glorious ancestors. If the Irish Patriots of the 1780s claimed their link with classical Greece, the United Irishmen were the first defenders of cultural nationalism, emphasizing the traditional aspects of Irish society against the gradual Anglicisation and loss of identity that threatened it. In such a framework, only national history could foster a feeling of belonging to a community. It was a living history contrary to classical antiquity and it could put forward moral and national ideals.

In 1790, Joseph Cooper Walker published *Outlines of a Plan for Promoting the Art of Painting in Ireland*. In this book, he gave a list of possible painting subjects all taken from Irish history. He claimed that the Irish nation was being formed and that the

crossover between national characteristics and art would allow Ireland to assert itself as a strong nation on the European chessboard (Walker 1790, 5). At that time, some Irish historians including himself tried to throw some light onto the history of their country in order to unite all Irishmen around a common and original past which they could be proud of. He encouraged artists to read history books or to look for subjects of painting in the chronicles. Walker also believed that Ireland should follow the example set by the context of the European Enlightenment because the promotion of art, he thought, would help to develop trade and enrich the nation in many ways.

Like James Barry, who he mentions in his book, Walker believed that history painting had a key role to play because it unveils what is at the core of each nation. This is an example of a subject for history painting recommended by Walker: ‘Saint Patrick encompassed with Druids, Bards and Chieftains, explaining the nature of the Trinity by means of the shamrock. A druidical temple overthrown, at some distance, the sun rising’ (Walker 1790, 32). The overthrown temple stands for the end of heathenism. But the scene proves that evangelisation was achieved peacefully as Patrick explains the Christian creed to the druids thanks to the shamrock. This is the representation of the fact that there was never a martyr in Ireland. The sun rises on this scene of reconciliation announcing the advent of a new era for Irish history, one that blends the ancient Irish virtues with those of the Christian religion brought from abroad. At the time of Celtic Christianity, the distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism didn’t exist. So the choice of this period to symbolise reconciliation is crucial.

Walker wanted to promote the national interests and thus went against the codes of history painting. He tried to reconcile national awareness with the classical character and the search for virtue. Irish history was also worth taking as a model of virtue.

Towards the end of his life, James Barry painted *The Baptism of the King of Cashel by Saint Patrick* whose subject had similarities with Walker's hint at history painting. This painting constitutes Barry's contribution to the debate on the Union with England. Barry supported it and even had expectations of it. But he also feared that the traditional vision of Irishmen as inferior to Englishmen could endanger a project which should be based on achieving full equality for all citizens. The problem also existed in the cultural field. Barry's unfinished work supports the historians' claim that Ireland's pre-Christian (and thus pre-Norman) culture is worthy of interest and even noble. Patrick and the king are clearly on an equal footing. The king has a stoic attitude, bowing his head to be baptised.<sup>2</sup> The ancient Irish were a civilisation of cultivated warriors. The king is a young and strong warrior whereas the patriarch is old and wise. Each of them seems to have something to learn from the other.

This baptismal scene symbolises the Anglo-Irish relationship as Barry understood it. Ireland could take England as model but it also had to preserve its own dignity. Patrick represents the Latin contribution to Irish culture but the fact that the temple is on the left implies that it was not imported from England by him.<sup>3</sup> Temples and dolmens in the background show that the greatness of the pre-Christian past still matters. Their presence also implies that Irish culture was as sophisticated as the classical culture before evangelisation. The juxtaposition of all these stages of civilisation shows the evolution of ancient Irish culture from the dolmen to the temple. Barry re-created or, should we say, imagined a sort of continuity between the distant past and the Ireland of his time. This also implied that Irishmen were as noble as their distant ancestors had been. Some of them even showed their strength and endurance under the Penal Laws. This work shows the union between pagan virtues inspired from

the Irish past and Christian piety in a world on a heroic scale. It also shows Barry's expectations of the Union but also his concern about the treatment of the Catholic population within the framework of the Union.<sup>4</sup>

In France, David's situation was quite different. He had a better financial situation than Barry and his reputation was well-established. First, David had not played an active role in the revolutionary process even though he had supported it. In fact, he realised that the Revolution offered unique opportunities to history painters: *'Il est de mon devoir de répondre aux nobles invitations de patriotisme et de gloire que suggère l'histoire de la Révolution la plus heureuse et étonnante'* (Lee 2002, 133). David considered his art as a means of expressing his patriotism. Around 1790, he began a painting which was to commemorate a prestigious revolutionary event, *The Oath of the Tennis Court*. The painting is a politically-informed epic representation of the event. The members of the Convention share their excitement at the decision they have just taken: they will give France a democratic constitution. David exhibited a preparatory drawing of the painting at the 1791 show, together with a list of the characters. Many of these characters can easily be identified. In the foreground, three clergymen, who have joined the Third Estate, are embracing each other fraternally, which symbolizes the advent of a new order in which divisions no longer exist.<sup>5</sup> Around them, one can see deputies raising their hats and arms to take the oath. The common people stand on the window ledges or on ladders to witness the historical moment. David chose to represent the scene during a thunderstorm to enhance its dramatic tension. A violent wind blows through the curtains. This weather evokes the purification of the ground which is regenerated after a thunderstorm (Lee 2002, 134-8). Unfortunately, David's work was never completed. He stopped working on it in 1792 because the reconciliatory vision of

the Revolution and the national unity that the painting was supposed to celebrate were now out of place. Some deputies had been compromised and the Revolution had now become the matter of the common people that David had relegated to the position of simple spectators. Some time later, David decided to exhibit the preparatory drawings again as well as *The Oath of the Horatii*. The two paintings are often compared because of their common epic representation.

Looking at these works by Barry and David, it seems clear that for them history painting is synonymous with personal commitment. Painting is not only a matter of aesthetics but it is mostly an intellectual undertaking. It shows the role that artists give themselves as history painters in society. They share a desire for reconciliation within their respective societies.

The end of the eighteenth century witnessed the development of public opinion as an active force on which the success of a work would now depend. David soon realised the importance of public opinion and tried to integrate a narrative or present-day interest which would please the public and attract its attention (Lee 2002, 8). Barry was also aware of the importance of the public taste but his situation of Irish Catholic exiled in London was not to his advantage for the recognition of his talent. Yet, Barry produced one of the first history painting cycles in Europe, *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*, shown at the Royal Society of Arts in London. The cycle covers the four walls of the Lecture room and is incredibly rich in terms of hints and references. In 1866, the Redgrave Brothers, Richard and Samuel, described Barry's immense work in the following terms: "He thus completed an epic in art, unique of its kind, the first and, so far, the last, which his country has produced" (Redgrave 1981, 81). This historical cycle shows the evolution of classical civilisation to the viewer. The

subject seems to be perfectly in accordance with the rules of history painting as depicted earlier, but Barry also integrated comments on the relationship between England and Ireland, an Irish subtext that has passed largely unnoticed until recently. He thereby hoped to inspire the public by giving them a moral example to follow and by claiming his role as a guide within British society.

In this series, consisting of six pictures, I have endeavoured to illustrate one great maxim or moral truth, that the obtaining of happiness, as well individual as public, depends on cultivating the human faculties. We begin with man in a savage state, full of inconvenience, imperfection and misery; and we follow him through several gradations of culture and happiness, which, after our probationary state here, are finally attended with beatitude or misery (Allan 2005, 52).

Barry claimed that patience, attention and some instruction were required to understand his art. He supported initiatives to create museums or galleries to exhibit works. His work was profoundly didactic and his aim was to transmit to the public his artistic vision of society and of a nation (Barry 1809, 277-80). He took this idea a bit further by designing a work with multiple layers of meaning that could only be understood in the light of his writings. His personal and artistic vision of the ideal nation was not perceptible at first glance. William Pressly showed that the historical cycle also has a profoundly Catholic meaning that Barry had to hide from the Royal Society of Arts for fear that his work would be rejected (Pressly 2005, 47-55).

Towards the end of his life, Barry did not hide his disappointment at the 1801 Union. The promises made to the Catholic population had not been held. Barry's disappointment at the Union appears obvious when one looks at the drawing *Passive Obedience* (1802-1805). The man on the left is turning away from the big black cloud at

the centre of the composition which represents destruction and chaos. In the top right corner, there are elements that represent the failure of civil society subsequent to the 1798 rebellion: gallows, cut-off heads and the whip. There are also scenes looking like depositions which identify the victims as martyrs. The details of the action are located on the sides. Characters symbolising the British oppression in Ireland can be identified, especially former kings. Their status is visible because they carry sceptres. King James I carries one which reads 'passive obedience' and 'divine justice.' This clearly mocks the claim that the right of kings is inherited from the gods. Next to James, you can recognize Rubens, the official painter of the monarchy, and Spenser, the famous author of *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, a book which describes the Irish as barbarians. Spenser is holding his book, *The Faerie Queen*. In the bottom left corner, there is a parody scene of the Act of Union in which the oath is taken on a skull, symbolising the promise of death. This is also a reinterpretation of one of Barry's works, *The Act of Union*. The male figure seems to be forced to seek the meaning of all this outside the drawing. The subject of this painting is probably history itself that cannot be represented in a fixed way like classical antiquity. Barry did not believe that the Union could ever benefit the Catholics. He could see that Irish Catholics were still considered as second-class citizens and that the promised emancipation had been crossed off the political agenda. He certainly hoped that this drawing would make people wonder about the all these unkept promises.

The artist consequently held a very important role within the society, a role which endowed him with a lot of responsibilities. David considered that works of art required a philosophical approach to life. Indeed, he wrote that:



Pour atteindre leur objectif, les chefs d'oeuvre doivent charmer autant que pénétrer l'âme et faire grande impression sur l'esprit autant que la réalité. Aussi l'artiste doit avoir étudié tous les ressorts de l'humanité et doit parfaitement connaître la nature. En clair, il doit être philosophe (Lee 2002, 6).

A nation is not only formed by its people and by its history, it is also characterised by its creative force. The link between artistic and historical experiences is a very important one to advance human knowledge according to French sociologist Mircea Eliade. It allows for the creation of 'cultural values,' whether they be expressed in art, in historiography or in philosophy (Eliade 1991, 113-5). During the Revolution, David portrayed virtue and patriotism and he glorified the revolutionary heroes while supporting the promise of social change. After 1793, he was threatened because of his membership of the Convention and he decided to retire from political life. He then decided to leave the portrayal of men behind to dedicate himself, instead to the sole representation of ideas and principles. But he grew so impressed by the charismatic personality of Napoleon Bonaparte that he soon became his official portraitist. He then started painting propagandist works such as *Napoleon Crossing the Alps at the Grand Saint-Bernard* (1800). This painting portrays Napoleon as a hero, on a reared up horse in stormy weather. This particular painting was criticised at the time because Napoleon looked fixed and unnatural.

Both Barry and David were criticised because their art was considered too intellectual and thus somewhat unapproachable by the common public. Delacroix blamed David for his lack of technique and for the stiffness of his paintings. In the British Isles, David was also known as one of the men who had sent Louis XVI to the guillotine. His works were thus almost universally rejected. Barry's works were often looked down upon because they were too crowded with characters or topical references.

Their meaning often went beyond the limits set by the framework as they called forth a lot of thinking. Barry's paintings cannot be understood at first glance. Nor can they achieve a spatial and a temporal unity, as they gather characters from different periods of time. Most critics could not separate Barry's and David's works from their political involvement, and both painters were criticised on these grounds.

History painting forbade the representation of contemporary scenes or of living people unless they were transferred to remote locations or distant times. David deliberately overlooked that code when he planned to paint *The Oath of the Tennis Court*. This neglect made the painting lose a lot of its immediate interest when the political situation changed, and so David gave up his project. Barry never represented contemporary scenes in a plain way. Some of his drawings or paintings have a topical interest but it is integrated into a classical atmosphere or outlook. *The Phoenix or Resurrection of Freedom* (1776-1790) is a sort of indictment of England in the context of the American Revolution. Liberty has fled to America and we can now see mourners on the British shores regretting her departure and mourning the subsequent death of Britannia. Around her body are gathered those who had worked for liberty according to Barry; Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, Andrew Marvel, Algernon Sydney, John Locke and Barry himself. Freedom left, according to Barry's painting, because British corruption had prevented her from blossoming:

O Liberty thou parent of whatever is truly amiable and illustrious, associated with virtue, thou hatest the luxurious and intemperate and hast successively abandoned thy loved residence of Greece, Italy, and thy more favoured England when they grew corrupt and worthless, thou hast given them over to chains and despondency and taken thy flight to a new people of manners simple and untainted (Pressly 1983, 73-5).

Barry certainly knew that his attack was too direct because he did not sign this painting. He also gathered historical figures in his imaginary paradise in the painting *Elysium and Tartarus or the State of Final Retribution*, the last painting of the historical cycle *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*. This painting was supposed to ‘bring together in Elysium those great and good men of all ages and nations, who were cultivators and benefactors of mankind’ (Allan 2005, 58). Among those historical figures, Barry had gathered people like Galileo, Copernicus, or Henry IV. Barry was convinced that art and artists played an important role in society by helping people to act so as to find happiness. David also defied the rules of history painting when he painted *The Oath of the Tennis Court*, indicating a crisis in the system of pictorial representation and a crisis in the institutions themselves. The fixed codes of history painting did not fit the reality of history anymore.

Both Barry and David were fully involved in their role of guide as artists within the society they lived in. Beyond social recognition, they sought to communicate their artistic vision of the nation, regardless of artistic institutions. They wanted to inspire the public through their art. Barry was the only member of the Royal Academy ever to be expelled. And he was so because his opinions were considered too democratic. David, as a well-established artist, encouraged his pupils to cultivate the creative and intellectual side of their art despite the opinion of the Academy according to which technique came first. Yet, we now admire both Barry and David for their involvement in the history of their country, for their works that are both anti-establishment and symbolic of the upheavals at work at the time. They tried to turn history painting into a contemporary and relevant genre, uniting universal principles with present-day events that they witnessed first-hand.

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